

THE MIKULA AND VOLGA FIREPLACE

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I. CERAMICS AT 'ABRAMTSEVO'

In 1870 the Russian railway tycoon, music-lover and patron of the arts, Savva Mamontov, bought 'Abramtsevo,' a culturally significant but rundown estate north-east of Moscow, situated on the banks of the lazy river Vorya amid rolling wooded countryside. Now Abramtsevo is on the edge of the fast-growing metropolis.

Mamontov, like many Russians of the merchant classes at the time, was both proudly self-conscious of his Russianness and fatally attracted both to the arts of 'civilised' Western Europe and the economic drive of industrial capitalism. He gathered around him artists, composers and writers all equally riven by these two antithetical passions. Part of the reason for buying 'Abramtsevo' was to focus on the Russianness, to revive the arts based upon the icon and the folktale, the romance of Russia's past, but ever conscious of the fashions and achievements of the present. Ironically Mamontov's fortune was in part based upon driving a railway across the wastes of Northern Russia, bringing industrial development and commerce to a region celebrated by the artists associated with 'Abramtsevo' for its myths and folktales, remote monasteries and mystical ascetics.

In 1876 the painter Ilya Repin wrote to a Russian friend from Paris that "everyone was busy with ceramics," meaning painting on blank plates and dishes, giving durability to the image after firing. Painting on ceramics, Repin claimed, would make possible a greater use of coloured images and decoration on the exterior of buildings where it could replace mosaics. "Imagine a whole frieze painted in this way! ... The method is quick and easy, like fresco painting, and for that reason is not an expensive method!"¹

Repin, who frequently visited 'Abramtsevo' after his return to Russia, was particularly enamoured of the ceramics of Joseph-Théodore Deck with its enamel polychrome faience surface, appealing to the Russian traditional taste for bright colours, high gloss and vivid surfaces, from icons to frescoes, including architectural detailing and what for some Western visitors was the garish Russian version of mid-seventeenth century Baroque.

In 1880 the artist and designer Elena Polenova, a member of Mamontov's circle, travelled in Western Europe to study the applied arts with a view to bringing knowledge back to Russia in order to revive craft skills that seemed in danger of being lost. She visited Deck's studio. She also studied Limoges enamel glazes with Paul Seifert. In 1888 she instituted 'ceramic Thursdays' at 'Abramtsevo,' when visiting artists were invited to decorate plate blanks and other objects with overglaze paints. Mamontov also dabbled in modelling from clay, as, more significantly, did the Russian artist Vrubel when he stayed at 'Abramtsevo.' Some of all this work was in Moscow.

In the early nineteenth century a kiln at 'Abramtsevo' had been used to make decorated majolica tiles in the long-established tradition of central Russia. When Mamontov bought the estate the kiln was in ruins, but some of the old tiles still existed and were added to the museum of Russian folk art he established on the estate. Probably as a result of the enthusiasm for ceramics brought about by the 'Thursdays,' the kiln was restored in 1889, becoming operational in 1890.

2. PIOTR VAULIN

The painter Mikhail Vrubel was appointed artistic director of the ceramics studio with assistance from a technically trained ceramicist, Piotr Vaulin.

Vaulin was born into a peasant family in the remote Urals in 1870. In 1888 he was awarded a scholarship to study at the Krasnoufimsk Agricultural Technical College. In addition to the basic course Vaulin studied ceramics, where he immediately displayed both skill and talent, qualifying as a ceramicist in 1890. On graduation he was invited to establish a workshop in heat-resistant and chemico-resistant ceramics in an as-yet-to-be-built technical institute in Chukhloma, a branch of the Technical College in Kostroma. In preparation for his appointment, Vaulin was funded to make a study of the contemporary ceramic industry in Russia and Finland and also to practice his craft in the newly restored ceramic workshop at 'Abramtsevo'. Due to the unexpected and sudden death of the director of the Kostroma Technical College, the Chukhloma appointment was not confirmed and Savva Mamontov invited Vaulin to stay on at 'Abramtsevo' to work as technical assistant to Vrubel.²

Soon Vrubel and Vaulin were making pottery responsive to 'an intimate national music,' a distinctive Russian style.³ Confident in his technical background, Vaulin 're-discovered' Russian majolica, low-fired tin-glazed pottery and, like other artists working at 'Abramtsevo', was encouraged to add his own creative ideas to traditional forms and methods.

Majolica-ware⁴ had a long history in the Russian applied arts, reaching a peak of national expressiveness in the tiles produced in the seventeenth century to face the exterior walls and window surrounds of palaces and churches, interior walls, stoves and stove-benches. Though majolica-ware was produced in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries in Russia, the style and manner of working was deeply influenced by Central and Western European prototypes. Vaulin proudly wrote: "I set myself the task of reviving Russian majolica in all the distinctive beauty of its Russian exotic character, of being a pioneer in this type of work."⁵

Natalia Polenova recalled that "the master craftsman Vaulin turned out to be talented and well-informed. The atmosphere of creativity that we all experienced [at 'Abramtsevo'] embraced him as well, and he was drawn to the whole variety of artistic moods. He began to contribute his own colourful glazes from his knowledge of chemistry and ceramics. The success of his innovations in this specialised field brought him the attention of artists ... he began to feel not simply a master craftsman, but a participating member of the artistic world, giving himself up completely to this interesting task."⁶

3. VAULIN AND VRUBEL

Both Mamontov and Vrubel began to model in clay before Vaulin's arrival, but lacked the skills necessary to glaze and fire their work. After his arrival, Vaulin and Vrubel began working together on projects for the 'Abramtsevo' estate – tiles for stoves and decorative friezes. From the very beginning their partnership was a joint venture in design, decoration, tile-making, bas-relief modelling, glaze technology and experimentation, but always based upon the heritage of Russian majolica from the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries. In 1890 they created two Russian stoves, including the famous 'stove-couch' that is still to be seen at 'Abramtsevo'.

Natalia Polenova again: "He [Vrubel] was closely associated with Vaulin in his work, shared his creative daydreams with him, sketched these ideas for him with watercolour, which excited him and which he wanted to realise in some actual form. Technically Vaulin tried to obtain the desired tones and in a practical way assist Vrubel to realise his fantastic dreams."⁷

In the stove-couch, the room-facing plane of the raised 'pillow' has the form of the head of a crouching lioness in a blue glaze to pick up the same colour in the tiles and column heads and feet of the round Russian arches that decorate the stove chimney façade. Mamontov placed versions of the lion's head (1891) on the gate of his Moscow house at 6 Sadovo-Spasskaia Street. The eclectic elements of the stove-couch make it seem like something older than its years, as if it were put back together carelessly during renovation, or of something that has grown over time, history being held in the accident, the asymmetry. This is certainly Vrubel's contribution, but the brilliance of both the smooth and faceted, glazed surfaces belongs to Vaulin.

It is interesting that in the literature Vrubel get almost all the credit. The technical potter is seldom mentioned. This reflects the lowly position of the ceramicist in the community – Vaulin is never present in the many photographs of the artists gatherings at 'Abramtsevo' – and became a cause of his later departure. Soviet sources also seldom mention Vaulin as he later became a victim of Stalin's displeasure: it is ironic that the worker, the practical man, was not treated to the romantic adulation of the eccentric painter.

When the reconstruction of the fireplaces and stoves had been completed at 'Abramtsevo' and the fashion for Vaulin to fire and glaze small pieces by other artists had run its course, in 1896 Mamontov shifted the ceramics workshop to larger premises in Moscow which was known as 'Abramtsevo at the Butyrsky Gates.'

4. ABRAMTSEVO AT THE BUTYRSKY GATES

Immediately, the new workshop began to produce majolica figurines to designs and models by Vrubel based upon characters in operas produced under the patronage of Savva Mamontov, particularly those on Russian themes by Rimsky-Korsakov. Products from the workshop were sold in Moscow and St Petersburg. At the same time Vrubel produced canvas wall-friezes, easel paintings and designs for ceramic vessels of a greater intensity of colouration and intricacy of design, almost disguising the subject matter under the weight of detail, enamel-like colour and the near fusion of subject and ground.

In 1896 Mamontov obtained a commission for Vrubel to decorate two semicircular walls at either end of a central hall dividing two galleries in which the Art Section would be displayed at the All-Russian Exhibition in Nizhny-Novgorod.⁸ One of these panels was based upon a sketch Vrubel had made the previous year of the subject of Mikula Selianinovich.



Figure 2. Mikhail Vrubel, *Mikula Selianinovich* (1896), sketch, watercolour and white over graphite on grey cardboard, 12.1 x 41.3 cm, Tretiakov Gallery, Moscow (inv. 3551).



Figure 1. Mikhail Vrubel and Piotr Vaulin, the stove-couch, 'Abramtsevo' (1890).

The story of Mikula is based upon an ancient *skazka*, an oral folk tale, first written down in the fifteenth century. The peasant Mikula is resting from ploughing to talk with a warrior on horseback, Prince Volga Sviatoslavovich, together with a band of henchmen. Mikula represents the link between the strong peasant, the soul of Russia, and the earth. His plough, made of gold, silver and maple, is so heavy no one else can lift

it. In one version of the tale he marries 'Mother Russia,' a rich widow. In another version he is the son of Moist Mother Earth. The independent spirit of the peasant farmer is opposed by the arrogant desire to dominate by the warrior-sorcerer. A trial of strength takes place in which Mikula proves his worth and, as a reward, is given the office of tribute-collector by the prince.

There are at least six extant preparatory sketches for the final panel, which was, however, rejected by the commissioners of the fair and then exhibited separately nearby by an irate and slighted Mamontov.

Vrubel fused many of the visual aspects of Prince Volga in his 1898 panel depicting a *Russian Mythical Knight (Bogatyr)* astride a Russian war-horse (*bitiug*). The work is related to the right half of the sketch in the Tretiakov Gallery, but differs markedly by its almost comic monumentality and static weight.⁹



Figure 3. Mikhail Vrubel, *Russian Mythical Knight (Bogatyr)* (1898), oil on canvas, 32.15 x 22.2 cm (top triangular). Russian Museum, St Petersburg (inv. Zh-1837). The original canvas was made to fit an arch in the house of M.V. Malich, the first owner of the painting.

5. THE MIKULA SELIANINOVICH AND VOLGA FIREPLACE

The All-Russian Fair in Nizhny-Novgorod served as an ideas platform for the Russian pavilion at the Exposition Universelle in Paris in 1900. The government decided to take a national theme, to design the pavilion as a fairy-tale Russian kremlin/monastery complex from the seventeenth century and to display Neo-Russian arts and crafts – the very objects made and promoted by those associated with 'Abramtsevo' and the ceramic workshop at the Butyrsky Gates.



Figure 4. Russian Pavilion, Exposition Universelle, Paris, 1900.

In 1899 Vrubel designed a fireplace surround depicting the legend of Mikul and Volga. On the left he depicted a massive sun-studded peasant standing four-square behind the horse-drawn plough, whilst on the right Volga sat astride his long-maned *bitiug*. Both *bogatryi*, folk heroes, glare silently at one another; gods of the land and water of ancient Rus, earth-loving ploughman and haughty warrior, both magic tricksters. On either side of the central arch of the surround perch winged female figures, the *sirins* of Russian legends, the angels or mother-gods of an even older northern Euro-Asian mythology.

The design richly wove the figures into a complex whole dominated by strong patches of contrasting colour and swirling forms to create a feast of textured surfaces where the apprehension of realistic representations was obscured by the sensual richness and delight of colour and fature.

Instead of using rectangular tiles in the ceramic version, Vaulin created individual pieces to fit the contours of the figures and elements of the ground. They were fired using the method of local reduction. The fettled seams (grouting) acted like lines in a drawing and this graphic dimension was accentuated by the creation of false fissures in the wet clay. This method of ceramic composition is known in Russian as 'false mosaics' (*lozhnaiamozaika*). Vaulin was also able to use a new range of lustre glazes he had only successfully fired for the first time in October 1899.

The fire surround, following Vrubel's original drawing, used a range of Russian sixteenth and seventeenth-century decorative forms including the central pendant (*girka*) and eyebrow arches, the surround itself resting on decorated short columns that in later versions Vaulin makes more reminiscent of *dynki* (melons), the ornamental swellings found on columns decorating window frames or doors in Russian architecture of the same period.

This original fire surround was lauded as a masterpiece of the Neo-Russian/Byzantine style and earned Vrubel a gold medal at the Exposition. Vaulin was awarded a Diploma of Honour for his developments in majolica technology. The Paris fire surround was sold from the Exposition and remains in France.

A second fire surround was also made in 1899–1900 for a Moscow mansion at 14 Sadovaia-Samotechnaialitsa. This was not an exhibition piece but made for use. It was attached to the walls with metal wire and concrete. There was a firebox and other fireplace furniture. In the 1960s the building was turned into an embassy. During the renovations the fireplace was broken up and hastily removed. The fragments were given to the Tretiakov Gallery. It was not until 1986 that the Grabar Centre for Artistic Restoration was commissioned to put the fireplace back together. It took ten years for the team, led by V I Cheremkhin, to clean each fragment, remove traces of soot and the rusted metal fastenings, and, like completing a complex jigsaw, gradually reassemble the fireplace. In 1994 the surround was finally restored. It took a further two years to redesign and remake the firebox and fire irons from the evidence of the single photograph that still existed of the original fire surround *in situ*.¹⁰



Figure 5. Mikhail Vrubel, *Mikula Selianinovich and Volga* (1899–1900), sketch for fireplace, watercolour on paper, 25.3 x 31 cm. Russian Museum, St Petersburg (inv. R-2436).



Figure 6. *Mikula Selianinovich and Volga* (1900), fire surround, photographed at the Exposition Universelle in Paris.



Figure 7. Mikhail Vrubel and Piotr Vaulin, *Mikula Selianinovich and Volga* (1899–1900), majolica, 225 x 275 cm. Tretiakov Gallery, Moscow.



Figure 8. Mikhail Vrubel and Piotr Vaulin, *Mikula Selianinovich and Volga*, Kolomenskoe Museum version.



Figure 9. Novikov apartment house, 11 Kolokol'naia Street, St Petersburg.

Three other versions seem to have been made in 1899-1900. One, in a dismantled state, is now in the Russian Museum, St Petersburg (acquired in 1957); a second is in the All-Russian Museum of Russian Decorative-Applied and Folk Art in Moscow (transferred from the collection of the Sergei Morozov Museum of Folk Art in 2003, where it had been acquired from 'Abramtsevo' in 1910); and a third is at the Kolomenskoe Museum, also in Moscow (transferred from the State Ceramic Museum in 1934).

Vaulin resigned his position at 'Abramtsevo at the Butrysky Gates' in October 1903 as a result of growing disagreements with the somewhat overbearing Mamontov and a desire to work more independently. He then took up a teaching position, running a studio-workshop at the Gogol Art and Industry College in Mirgorod, where he stayed for two and a half years, from October 1903 until June 1906.

One of his commissions at Mirgorod was to make the ceramic decoration for the Neo-Byzantine apartment block of the architect Nikolai Nikonorov in St Petersburg (Kolokol'naiaulitsa 11). The result was a triumph of Vaulin's talents, every recess in the façade being decorated with multi-coloured ceramic panels, false mosaics and decorative *dynki* columns. It was through this commission that Vaulin's talents became widely known and appreciated in the capital, particularly among other architects working on town mansions in the Neo-Russian style for rich merchants.

6. THE GELDVEIN–VAULIN CERAMIC ART COMPANY, KIKERINO

Vaulin left Mirgorod in 1906 to go into partnership with Otto Geldvein, establishing a commercial ceramic studio-workshop in the village of Kikerino on the Baltic railway line to the south-west of St Petersburg. Vaulin's studio was soon overwhelmed with orders to decorate the interior and exterior of apartment blocks, offices, churches, cathedrals and mansions, some, like the Novikov building, in the Neo-Russian style, others in the style of art nouveau.

In 1908 the Kikerino workshop made a further version of the Mikula fireplace for the reception room of a mansion built (1907-09) for the merchant Filadel'f Bazhanov at 72 ulitsa Marata (formerly Nikolaevskaya ulitsa) in St Petersburg, where it complemented a 'northern art nouveau' Bogatyrsky (*Mythical Knight*) frieze by Nikolai Roerich, a painter



Figure 8. Mikhail Vrubel and Piotr Vaulin, *Mikula Selianinovich and Volga*, Kolomenskoe Museum version.



Figure 9. Novikov apartment house, 11 Kolokol'naya Street, St Petersburg.

who had worked previously with Vaulin.¹¹

In addition to the surround Vaulin also designed the cast-iron trivet, fire irons and fire bars, as well as the brass serpents on the firebox, all in a combination Neo-Russian/art nouveau style. It seemed entirely appropriate as a complement to the Legendary Knight frieze decorating the reception room.

Apart from the Bazhanov and Tretiakov fireplaces, both of which had been at one time regularly used, all other variants were made as 'exhibition pieces.'

The Mikula fire surrounds are the highest achievement of co-operation between an artist-designer (Vrubel) and ceramic artist (Vaulin) in Russian pre-revolutionary art. They both access the spirit of Russian ancient folk tales, seventeenth-century architectural decoration and majolica, glaze – particularly lustre – technology, the innovative assemblage of ceramic pieces (false mosaic) and their placement in Neo-Russian architecture. Their rediscovery and partial restoration are entirely in keeping with the intense interest in pre-revolutionary art and architecture in Russia in the twenty-first century.

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- 1 Vasilii Dmitrievich Polenov: *Elena Dmitrievna Polenova: Khronika semi khudozhnikov* (Moscow: Iskusstvo, 1964), 728 n. 57.
- 2 Alison Hilton, *Russian Folk Art* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1995), 325 n. 50.
- 3 Vrubel in a letter to his sister, summer 1891. *Vrubel': Perepis'ka, vospomaniia o khudozhiike*, eds EP Gomberg-Verzhbinskaia et al. (Leningrad: Iskusstvo, 1976), 56-7.
- 4 Clay is pressed into plaster of Paris moulds, fired to biscuit at 1100 degrees, then covered with an opaque tin/lead glaze, decorated with coloured metal oxide glazes, then fired a second time at 750 degrees.
- 5 Mark Kopshtser, *Savva Mamontov* (Moscow: Iskusstvo, 1972), 133.
- 6 Natalia Polenova, *Abramtsevo: Vospominaniia* (Moscow: Izd. M. and S. Sabashnikov, 1922), 81.
- 7 Ibid, 82.
- 8 A summary of the history of Vrubel's panels at the All-Russian exhibition is to be found in VI Lapshin, "Vrubel' na Vserossiiskoi vystavke 1896 goda," *Iz istorii russkogo iskusstva vtoroi poloviny XIX-nachala XX veka* (Moscow, 1978), 78-91. See also the chapter on the 1896 All-Russian Fair in Kirsten Harkness, "The Phantom of Inspiration: Elena Polenova, Mariia Iakunchikova and the Emergence of Modern Art in Russia," Unpub. PhD dissertation (University of Pittsburgh, 2009), 248-52.
- 9 See Piotr Suzdalev, *Vrubel'* (Moscow: Sovetskii khudozhhnik, 1991), 304-5.
- 10 For a fuller version of the restoration of the Tretiakov version of the fireplace, see <http://www.virtualmuseum.ru/exhibition/vrubel/en/conference/mikula.html>.
- 11 The frieze consisted of seven large canvases and 12 of a smaller size that are now in the Russian Museum, St Petersburg. In addition to the Mikula fire surround, Vaulin's studio-workshop supplied the Bazhanov house with six majolica corner stoves and four centre-wall fireplaces to designs by the architect Pavel F Aleshin.